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Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics

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GROUP DISCUSSION AND THE PROBLEMS OF FARM YOUNG PEOPLE

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EXPERIMENT STATION

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Note: Group discussion is an extension technic which is being used widely with groups of farm young people. This circular attempts to bring together some of the better discussion procedures used by cooperative extension workers. At a later date it is hoped to issue detailed discussion outlines. Your cooperation in furnishing such outlines based upon your experience with the discussion method is solicited.

DISTRIBUTION: A copy of this circular has been sent to each State extension director; State and assistant State leader in county agricultural, home demonstration, and club work; county agricultural, home demonstration, and club agent; extension economist in farm management; specialist in agronomy and farm crops, dairying, horticulture, and pomology, and marketing; agricultural-college library; and experiment-station library.

Group discussion is a teaching technic that can be used to improve the thinking ability of those participating. Successful leadership of group discussion is an art that comes from persistent practice. Like skill in extension work or in teaching, it comes naturally to a few persons, but with the majority it is a cultivated accomplishment. The discussion method is an effective approach to many of the problems of more mature boys and girls on farms.

When To Use the Discussion Method

Many of the operations in connection with a farm and home enterprise have become standardized and can be taught through the demonstration method. Other operations involving a greater degree of managerial ability are not so highly standardized and require the exercise of judgment. Very few situations with reference to the management of a farm or a home as a whole exactly parallel any others. Therefore, decisions cannot be standardized. Judgment has to be exercised to arrive at the more satisfactory ways of meeting these situations. Similarly, plans for farming and for homemaking covering long periods of time cannot be based upon exactly similar experiences and standard set-ups. One way that young people can be aided in such situations is through helping them to improve their thinking ability. The differences in extension procedures make an understanding of teaching by the discussion method highly desirable in such situations.

The Discussion Method Illustrated

At a meeting there may be what commonly is considered a discussion, but the teaching technic may be simply (1) informing, or (2) demonstrating an improved practice, or (3) a real discussion where constructive thinking is involved.

A boy might present a sick chicken to the extension leader, the leader might (1) tell the boy the name of the disease and the remedy, (2) show the boy how to prevent a recurrence of the disease in the future, or (3) discuss with members of the group the symptoms and causes of the disease and possible remedies, and conditions in the members' flocks in order that they might know how to handle their birds if the disease were present.

A girl might present the difficulty she is having with her clothing budget. The leader might (1) tell her of a book on clothing budgets, (2) help her to record her clothing expenditures on a standardized form and to compare them with a typical budget, or (3) discuss with her and other members of the group the place of clothing in the family budget, the relationship of the individual's expenses to those of other members of the family, and arrive at a fair distribution of the family expenses and the place of clothing expenditures in the individual's personal budget.

The instances cited under "(3)" in each case illustrate the sense in which the term "discussion method" is used in this manuscript.

The following table contains additional illustrations of how the different extension procedures have been used to teach different phases of farming and homemaking.

Extension Procedures

Informing (remember)	Demonstrating (imitate)	Discussing (think)
Radio talk on marketing demands for apples.	Graft or prune trees.	Plan a new orchard.
Read articles on symptoms and remedy for hog cholera.	Vaccinate for hog cholera.	Work out hog-cholera prevention program.
Listen to potato outlook talk.	Spray potatoes.	Plan a potato rotation.
Hear lecture on line and color.	Make garments.	Draw up family clothing budget.
Talk on factors for success in poultry management.	Cull poultry.	Plan a poultry flock a supplementary enterprise.
Attend lecture on saving steps.	Adjusting working surfaces.	Reorganize kitchen.
Listen to lectures on etiquette.	How to greet guests.	How to conduct an interesting conversation.
Talk on parents' and young people's relationships.	Work assignment.	Draw up partnership agreement.
Read books on the family.	How to dress attractively.	Factors to consider in choosing a mate.
Lectures on food values.	Can sweet corn.	Plan meals for a week
Listen to lecture on trend in farm wages.	Keep farm records.	Determine fair-wage agreement with father.

Farm Young People's Problems

Young people who are out of school and at home on farms and who have not married or started farming on their own account, are faced with more long-time problems requiring judgment or the making of decisions than is any other group of farm people. The growth of unemployment in nonagricultural occupations has caused a marked increase in the numbers of such young people. This increase has been estimated as at least two million individuals more in 1935 than at the time of the last census. In other words, in most counties there are now as many of these young people as there are farms in the county. Because of this surplus of young people and the present agricultural adjustment program, larger numbers than ever before are faced with the alternative of deciding whether to seek employment in nonagricultural occupations or in agriculture. The unemployment situation makes this task more difficult. If this type of problem is to be met successfully clear concepts are needed of the kind of living various nonagricultural occupations are likely to provide as well as the type of living that may be obtained from various systems of farming. These young people also are associating with other young people and will be choosing a life mate, and many of their ideals as to a future home are being crystallized. If they are to be skilled in making decisions they will need the same kind of practice in reasoning or in formulating judgments as they receive through our present extension program for improving their farm and home practices.

If we are going to help young people to improve their thinking ability we shall have to use an extension technic peculiarly adapted to this teaching problem. The use of the discussion method is advantageous only under certain circumstances. Superiority is not in this method itself but in its proper use.

At different periods in life farm people are confronted with different situations. The decisions made at different periods determine what the individual's future will be. The situations characteristic of these different periods are somewhat as follows:

1. A 4-H boy or girl of grade or high-school age usually is acquiring skill in performing various practices and judgment as to standards of quality relating to the farm or the home.
2. When they finish their schooling they are concerned with the choice of a vocation. If they decide to go into a nonagricultural occupation they begin to look around for openings where their training and experience can be utilized and a fair wage earned. If they stay at home on their father's farm, in addition to acquiring skill in the performance of farm and home operations they begin (1) to accumulate capital, livestock, and equipment; (2) to determine what type of farming to follow, what kind of a living they desire, and how best to get started in farming to obtain this living; (3) to learn how to conduct themselves under different situations; and (4) to improve their personal appearance and social conduct.

3. When a young couple begin to farm on their own account generally their capital is limited. They are attempting to build up the size of their business, raise a young family, and work out an efficient system of farming and homemaking. In most cases they are tenants, or own a farm, heavily mortgaged.
4. Members of a farm family that has been longer established generally have chosen their system of farming and homemaking and built up a credit standing. They have not the incentive to make the major adjustments in their system of farming and homemaking that the younger people may have.

This circular is concerned mainly with the use of the discussion method in relation to the problems growing out of the period described in item "(2)." Some of the problems in which young people have shown interest and where the discussion method has been used are listed on the following page.

DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR FARM YOUNG PEOPLE

The Farm

Would you rather be dependent upon a job in _____ factory at the minimum wage, or own and live on an average farm in your community?

What kind of future - social, economic, etc. - can you look forward to from farming?

What is the best method for a young man to follow to get started in farming in your community?

What farming arrangements between fathers and sons in your neighborhood do you consider most satisfactory?

What renting agreements in effect in your community are practical for a young man who wishes to start farming?

Under what conditions would it be desirable to remain on the home farm?

What practices should a young man follow to acquire a credit standing sufficient to purchase a farm?

What size and quality of farm should it be necessary to own to secure a living satisfactory to you?

What training and experience should a young man receive preparatory to becoming a dairy farmer?

What size and quality of farm will maintain the living you desire, pay ordinary farm expenses, and leave you free from debt after 20 or 30 years of ownership?

How can farm and enterprise records and the agricultural outlook help farmers to improve the management of their farms?

What farm and home records are kept in your family, and how are they used, or should they be used, as a guide to better management?

The Home

What is the cost of a typical farm-family budget in your community?

1. What foods are purchased by your family and at what cost?
2. What clothing is provided for your family and at what cost?
3. What other things does your family purchase? (Specify.)

What are the things you feel a farm family should not be required to do without?

The Individual

How can I manage myself to develop those personal characteristics that will make me successful as a farmer and homemaker?

How can I become acquainted with good books?

What are the relative values in living (health, wealth, character, education, etc.)?

How shall I act on different social occasions?

How can I develop a pleasing personality?

What can I do to improve my personal appearance?

The Community

History of county industries.

Analyses of the tax bill.

Activities of county government.

How can I help to improve the community social and recreational activities?

The Discussion Leader's Preparation

If the discussion method is to be used the leader must first of all be sure that he has discovered one of the group problems and that most of the members of the group have had some experience with it, otherwise there will be no basis for interest or discussion. The first characteristic of a good discussion leader is the ability to discover the real experiences and problems of the group. If a leader is going to help the group to organize its thinking he must first have organized his own thinking. To think a problem out accurately, the leader must understand the various alternatives or possible choices under the circumstances, the information or facts to be considered, and the destinations at which the various choices will cause the individual to arrive.

When the young man leaves school and begins to study the various occupational choices ahead of him he will want to know the relative advantage and disadvantages of farming compared with other occupations. If he

decides to become a doctor he will have to get the required training and experience necessary to obtain a permit to practice medicine, and to look forward to the kind of a life a doctor usually experiences. If he should desire to become an engineer he would follow an entirely different course of study and live an entirely different kind of life. However, if he decides to become a farm operator he is confronted with the choice of the type of farming he wants to follow and the question of how he should go about getting the necessary training, experience, and capital to succeed with that type of farming. The kind of a life he would lead would be entirely different from that of the doctor or engineer.

Not only must the discussion leader have made a correct analysis of the group's problems, but the group must be conscious that the problems are theirs. As with most individuals, members of such groups do not always realize the full significance of their choices. To be sure that the group will be interested in the topics under discussion the leader should help the members to list activities and to indicate some of the problems growing out of these activities.

In using the discussion method as an extension procedure it is assumed that the groups have had experiences with the problems under discussion. The subjects for discussion must relate to these experiences. The leader's experiences may be far beyond those of the young people with whom he deals; the young people can only conceive of the things they have experienced. If the group is to be instructed in matters in which they have not had experience, informational or demonstration methods will have to be used.

Selection of the Group

In most cases it will be better to use the discussion method with a group that already has been organized and whose members are acquainted with each other. However, if such a group is not available the following plan has been found successful:

To get a group of young people with like interests and problems it may be necessary to build up a list of names and addresses and to interview sufficient numbers of persons to make sure that common interests and common problems have been determined. Generally it is found that a large proportion of the possible candidates have never been interested in extension work. Others have been 4-H club members but have dropped out for one reason or another. An interview makes an occasion to present the idea to the individual concerned and to his parents, and to obtain an expression of his ambitions and what might be done to help. From this list, those who would make up congenial groups can be chosen:

- (1) Common interests may be enterprises such as poultry, hogs, dairy cattle, or some phase of homemaking such as clothing, landscaping, food, or some larger problem such as management of the farm or the home.
- (2) In many counties groups of young farm people are acting as local 4-H club leaders or assistants. These young people make a very active nucleus for a discussion group.

- (3) Young people are interested in those of the opposite sex. A social program is therefore effective in bringing them together.
- (4) They have many other common interests, such as management of self, personal improvement or development, life planning, etc.
- (5) In many areas large numbers of young people of this age group are giving consideration to earning other living from nonagricultural occupations. The training and experience required and the returns from occupations other than agriculture are of peculiar importance to them.

The Group's Preparation

The discussion proceeds more effectively if there has been some previous preparation on the part of the group. This preparation may take the form of observations that members have been asked to make in their own community, suggesting certain situations or problems to be talked over in the home; or preparation to open the discussion on a given topic. The more accurate the facts are that have been gathered on the topic under discussion, the greater will be the interest of group members and their chances for arriving at sound conclusions.

Guiding Group Discussion

Even though an interesting topic for a discussion may have been presented, if certain physical requirements are not met the meeting may prove a failure. Group discussion is best where everyone can see the faces of all the other members. Comfortable chairs, a place to make notes, proper light and ventilation add much to the success of the session. A blackboard or a large piece of paper upon which the leader can write down the ideas presented by the group helps to keep the discussion to the point and the interest active.

In order that there may be a wide range of ideas and at the same time opportunity for everyone to participate, the discussion group is most efficient when there are not less than 12 or more than 20 members. Large numbers limit the extent of participation and the training the individual receives. In many cases however, it may be best to continue with the larger group.

At the opening of the meeting the problem under discussion should be recorded and the plan of procedure made clear.

One of the problems in connection with every discussion meeting is how to get the meeting started smoothly. Some of the methods used have been -

1. To have several members of the group prepared to open the discussion.
2. To call upon a member who has had experience or who has strong opinions on the topic under discussion.

- (3) To have a qualified outside speaker present his point of view.
- (4) To have a number of members with different opinions regarding the subject under discussion present their points of view first.
- (5) To have the members, if they have never met before as a discussion group, write their suggestions on slips of paper, may help to get the discussion started.

Whatever method of opening the discussion is used, it must be well thought out and the technic for handling the various situations considered.

Many means are used to insure the participation of everyone in the group. As soon as the meeting is well under way the leader should pay particular attention to who is participating and who is not. Soon the problem of drawing those not participating into the discussion should be given attention. If one of these individuals by some physical expression shows interest but does not speak, he should be encouraged to present his ideas. If any individual should be backward but has had experience with the questions under discussion, he might be called upon direct by the leader. Often the opinion of everyone can be sought by calling upon them in regular order as they are seated about the table. However, care should be taken not to embarrass anyone. On the other hand, a few individuals may want to monopolize the discussion. If they persist, it might be pointed out that the opinion of everyone in the group is desired and that they be given a chance. This technic tends to distribute the contributions. The group members should be watched to determine their interest before acting.

Under many conditions the use of blackboard and large sheets of paper is found valuable as an aid in checking the attitude of the members of the group toward the points noted. Some of the headings or classifications that have been found effective are:

Advantage		Disadvantage	
Causes	Responsibilities	Remedies	
Likes	Dislikes	How to correct?	
What is wrong?	Who is to blame?	What can be done	

If the leader finds that his headings for making notes do not meet the situation they should be changed. To develop skill in discussion leadership, practice is necessary. Indeed to learn this teaching method, good demonstrations should be observed and analyzed. Potential discussion leaders should practice under guidance of a successful discussion leader, and should learn to criticize and improve his own technic. Repetition is as essential an element in learning to be a successful discussion leader as it is in any other learning situation.

To enable the leader to improve his technic it might be well for him to score himself after each session. The following check sheet is submitted, but some other device might prove equally effective.

Discussion Leader's Check Sheet

Place of meeting _____ Topic _____ Date _____

Was the outline for the discussion of the subject matter good? _____

Where did I obtain subject matter? _____

Was the topic under discussion made clear at the beginning? _____

What device did I use to start discussion? _____ Prepared speakers _____

Outside speakers _____ Individuals called on _____ Was it effective? _____

What preparations had individuals made? None ___ Observations ___ Reading _____

Interviews _____ Gathered data _____

Were discussion questions asked in such a way as to bring out alternative situations? _____

Were problems under discussion common to all members of group? _____

Number in group _____ Was group too large? _____

How many participated? None _____ Few chosen individuals _____

Majority _____

Was discussion lively? _____ Jerky _____ Slow _____ "Spotty" _____

Did discussion wander? _____

Did I express my own opinions too much? _____

Did group opinions predominate? _____

Did the group arrive at some plan of action, conclusion, or recommendation? _____

How many were interested? Few _____ Minority _____ Majority _____ All _____

Did discussion continue after conference? _____

Did meeting start on time? _____

How were seats arranged? Rows facing leader _____ Semicircle _____

Around table _____

Were supplies and equipment available? Blackboard _____ Paper _____ Pencils _____

Tables _____ Chairs _____ Light _____ Heat _____

List distractions: _____

How to plan to avoid in the future difficulties encountered at this meeting

Not only must the person leading the discussion have thought the problem through himself, but he must so stimulate the thinking of members of the group that they will become more skillful in their thinking processes. This improvement in thinking is arrived at (1) by exchange of experiences, information, and facts among members of the group; (2) by the relative weight given to these experiences, information, and facts by other members; (3) by the encouragement received to constructive thinking rather than by rationalizing to justify a certain idea (debate); (4) by trying out under their own conditions solutions at which group members arrived; (5) by participating in the discussion; or (6) by further observations. Group members will not succeed in developing absolutely accurate judgments the first time any more than they can perform a new farm and home practice perfectly the first time.

A large part of this training in thinking should consist in using present experiences to build up mental pictures or plans with reference to a future farm and home, and in so guiding the present actions of the group members that they will have the necessary capital and credit to obtain the right kind of a farm and home.

Everyone has an ambition for himself - a life plan or scheme which determines in a large way his individual actions. The individual may not have given much conscious thought to this scheme, but it motivates his choices and decisions just as effectively as though he had given thought to it. Each new experience modifies this condition. Most people who have succeeded in life have had a conscious plan or goal and worked persistently toward it. If an individual is to become a successful business man or farmer or homemaker this same persistence in striving for some goal must be a part of his make-up. Determination to earn a living through farming requires a clear idea of a type of farming, its extent and efficiency under conditions in the locality where the individual intends to make his home. The discussion method is an effective way to make these plans or programs clearer.

If the group is to develop increasing skill in thinking, the leader will have to be cautious not to express his opinions or feeling in such a way as to bias their remarks or to be drawn into answering questions that should be discussed by the group members themselves. It is the practice in thinking through discussion that develops skill in reasoning on the part of the individuals participating.

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